

BETWEEN PRETORIA AND GEORGE GOCH HOSTEL

GOD IN SOUTH AFRICA IN 2015

By By Tinyiko Maluleke

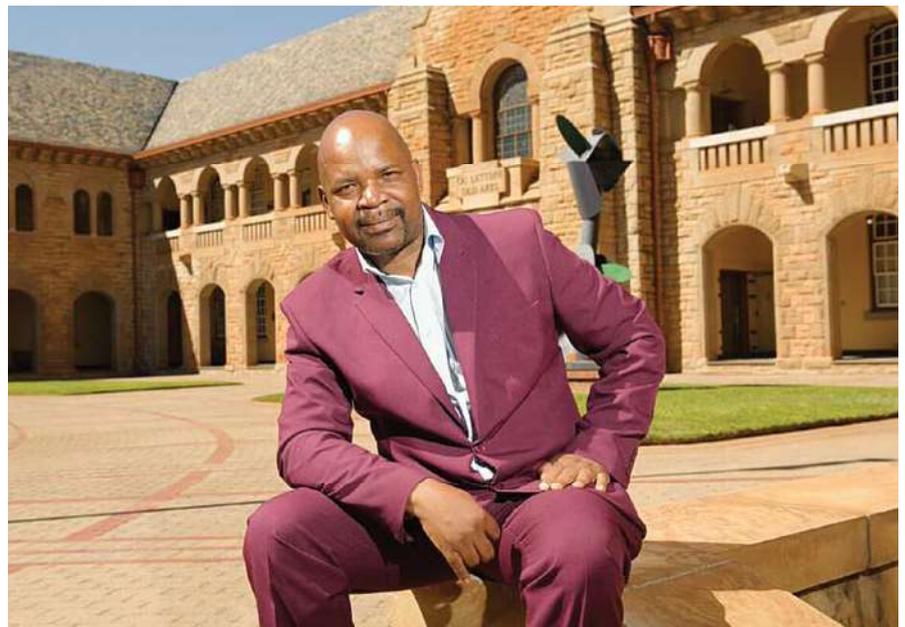
The author is a professor in the faculty of theology at the University of Pretoria. He is also assistant to the vice-chancellor in the development of the university's Africa Strategy

The three men in charge of South Africa's executive, judiciary and parliamentary opposition are all involved in charismatic churches while, at the lower levels of society, self-proclaimed prophets lead their flocks in ritual acts of humiliation. For this writer, all these are signs of a toxic and pervasive model of leaders and followers.

UNTIL JESUS COMES

One of the controversial and often repeated utterances of South African President Jacob Zuma is the suggestion that the ANC will rule until Jesus comes back. Some media practitioners have described this as Zuma's "Jesus tendency", and it seems to become more pronounced during election campaigns. In a largely Christian country such as South Africa, the return of Jesus – which is central to Christian hope and belief – is one of society's root metaphors, one that connects with the masses and is variously imagined in popular art, literature and spirituality.

But Zuma's pairing of the return of Jesus with a political party's term in office seems particularly innovative. Indeed, some people have taken offense. The ANC and the Presidency responded swiftly and strongly that the president speaks only metaphorically and as a Christian and that, since no one has a



Prof Tinyiko Maluleke

copyright on Jesus, he has as much right as anyone to appropriate for himself the meaning and message of Jesus.

However, Zuma's vision is not the most radical one in South African history. In 1981, Mbongeni Ngema, Percy Mtwana and Barney Simon scripted an imaginative and outrageous depiction of the return of Jesus to a South Africa in the throes of apartheid. *Woza Albert!* was a pulsating political satire aimed directly at the apartheid regime's claim

to be a Christian government.

The Jesus of *Woza Albert!* lands in the township among the poor and the marginalised. Such is his shock at this situation of dehumanisation, he not only joins the people in their struggle but ends up getting arrested like so many others at the time. One of the many poignant moments comes when Jesus pleads with his followers to "forgive the powers that be for they do not what they are doing". His followers respond, "But Morena (Lord), >>>

these ones know, they know exactly what they are doing.” The play ends with Jesus calling the great heroes of liberation – Albert Luthuli, Steve Biko, Lillian Ngoyi, Robert Sobukwe and many others – back to life, resurrecting them one by one.

GOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1988, at the height of anti-apartheid ungovernability, a South African Dominican friar named Albert Nolan published a daring book called *God in South Africa*. It was meant to “rescue” God from the clutches of apartheid, a political system that was recognised around the world as a crime against humanity.

Nolan suggested that God was not to be found in the corridors of the Union Buildings, nor in the pulpits of whites-only churches, nor in the affluent whites-only suburbs. Instead, he argued, God was to be found among the suffering masses daily humiliated by a system that sought to allocate value to human life according to race. Anyone looking for God in South Africa was likely to find God among the workers – objectified, cheated, overworked and underpaid – for whom work had become a curse. God lived among the squatters, and was one of the homeless who roamed the streets. For Nolan, God was a prisoner at John Vorster Square, tortured, starved and wantonly killed. Worse still, maybe God had left South Africa, exiled from the land in a desperate attempt to not be implicated in the dehumanisation of humans by other humans under the system of apartheid.

In the Kairos Document of 1986, Nolan and his contemporary theologians and pastors distinguished between what the state propagated about God (state theology), what the church propagated about God (church theology), and the insurrectionist, counter-hegemonic, subversive beliefs about God that they called “prophetic theology”. After twenty-one years of democracy, this three-tier distinction remains a useful tool of analysis. Where are the prophetic voices to be found today? Where is God in South Africa today?

IF JESUS RETURNED TODAY

The serious question raised by both *Woza Albert!* and Albert Nolan is this: if Jesus were to return in present-day South Africa, what would he do? Where the president imagines Jesus returning only after many years of ANC rule, Ngema and Co. envisaged a quicker return, in our lifetime. Where the president seems to suggest that his government rules on behalf of Jesus, the *Woza Albert!* Jesus appointed no proxy authority and adopted no earthly government.



This Jesus is furious at the way things are – the poverty, the hunger, the corruption and deceit that reign while the innocent suffer.

Where the Zuma Jesus returns to confirm the government of the day, the *Woza Albert!* vision is totally disruptive. There never was and never will be a peaceful handover of power between the *Woza Albert!* Jesus and the earthly powers that be. It will ultimately be nothing short of a hostile takeover. In *Woza Albert!*, Jesus returns not as a friend of those in power and not as a neutral. In contemporary parlance, the Jesus of *Woza Albert!* comes back to kick butt.

What of today? Our young democratic South Africa cannot be likened – even remotely – to apartheid South Africa, but comparisons are inevitable, given the long shadow cast by history. But if you can imagine a returned Jesus who would resurrect Andries Tatane, who was shot and killed by police during a service-delivery protest; Reeva

Steenkamp, who was shot to death by her boyfriend; Anene Booysen, who was raped, stabbed and left to die; Nelson Chisale, who was fed to the lions of Phalaborwa; Mido Macia, who was publicly tortured and later killed by police; Ernesto Nhamuave, who was burnt to death in the xenophobic attacks of 2008; Emmanuel Sithole, who was stabbed and killed the 2015 xenophobic attacks in Alexandra Township; and each and every one of the 44 men who were killed in Marikana in 2012, then you have a fair estimation of the Jesus of *Woza Albert!*.

The *Woza Albert!* Jesus is not resting in peace somewhere in the sky while the South African president rules leisurely and joyfully on his behalf. This Jesus is similar to one in *Chesa Mpama* (“a hard slap”), the hit song by the late kwaito star Senyaka Kekana: an angry Jesus who smashes the counters and scatters and merchandise of those who wheel and deal in his church. This is not the Jesus of “it is well, it is well”. This Jesus is furious at the way things are – the poverty, the hunger, the corruption and deceit that reign while the innocent suffer.

Were Jesus to return today, he would find a country not only battling with the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality, but also with the challenges of corruption, bad religion and toxic leadership. I suggest that all of these are at play in the bizarre practices of a few charismatic church groups and their leaders, such as the “snake pastor” phenomenon that has raged in our media in the second half of 2015. But before we turn to the gory details of these churches, we need to paint a broader context of God in South Africa today.

THE GOD OF JACOB ZUMA

Leading South African academic Barney Pitso Moseneke has noted that at least three top South African public officials hold leadership positions in conservative Christian churches: President Jacob Zuma, Chief Justice



Photo: GCIS

Mogoeng Mogoeng and Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane.

In 2007, while still deputy-president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma was reportedly made an “honorary pastor” by a group of independent charismatic churches. Apart from the “until Jesus returns” claim, Zuma has suggested that a business that donates to the party will win the favour of God and the ANC and therefore prosper. At an election rally in Mthatha on 4 February 2011, the president reportedly admonished his audience not to waste their votes, saying, “When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven. When you don’t vote for the ANC, you should know that you are choosing that man who carries a fork ... who cooks people.” In a 2006 interview, he declared that he conducts his life “from basic Christian principles. Christianity is part of what I am; in a way it was the foundation for all my political beliefs”.

An organisation called the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC) was formed 1997 as an initiative of the

ANC’s religion desk. In 2011, during Zuma’s first term, the NILC and the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) combined to form the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA), led by Pastor Ray McCauley of the charismatic Rhema Church, who has become close to the Presidency and to the ruling party.

More recently, during the Presidency budget debate in parliament, in a performance designed to deride his detractors in the Nkandla saga, President Zuma introduced a new, if somewhat baffling, “Jesus tendency” utterance, exclaiming “*thixo wase George Goch!*” In a City Press column on 31 May 2015, Mondli Makhanya joined the multitudes “scratching their heads as to why the godforsaken men’s hostel was being given a god”. The phrase, apparently borrowed from mineworkers’ fanakalo, probably refers to a power-hungry mine boss or induna who thought he was “the god of George Goch” hostel. If so, he was a plastic, domestic and entirely local

god, hence the scornful tone of “*thixo wase George Goch*”.

A theological trajectory is discernable from the president’s statements. It includes a Jesus at whose pleasure and on whose behalf the ANC will rule from now until the end-times. The god of the gospel-according-to-Zuma is completely aligned with the ANC, which is his chosen vessel and representative in South Africa. God blesses those who bless the ANC and the ANC in turn will bless those who bless it. This god and Jesus are card-carrying party members.

The uncanny irony is that President Zuma’s clowning about the megalomaniacs of George Goch might just as well refer to his own striving. That he is, within the ANC, its most powerful president since democracy is no longer much doubted. Nor have his power tussles with the National Prosecuting Authority, his control of cabinet appointments, as well as his firm grip on both the Union Buildings and Luthuli House gone unnoticed. >>

THE GOD OF MOGOENG THOMAS MOGOENG

The chief justice is a lay preacher in the local branch of the Winners' Chapel International Church. (Its founder, David Oyedepo is the richest pastor in Nigeria, and probably in Africa, with Forbes magazine estimating his net worth at \$150 million.) Mogoeng told the Judicial Services Commission that God wanted him to take the appointment.

In a 2014 address at Stellenbosch University, entitled "Law and religion in Africa: The quest for the common good in pluralistic societies", Mogoeng argued that,

if a way could be found to elevate the role of love and the sensible discouragement of divorce, through legal mechanisms, [then] marital and family sanctity, and stability would be enhanced. A legal framework that frowns upon adultery, fornication, separation and divorce, subject to appropriate modification, would, idealistic as this may appear to be, help us curb the murders that flow from adultery, help us reduce the number of broken families and the consequential lost and bitter generation that seems to be on the rise, which in turn cause untold harm to society.

As noted by several observers at that time, and despite subsequent denials by the chief justice, it seems that he would like to elevate the Odeyepo brand of charismatic Christian ethics into a national, if not continental, legal framework. On the face of it, the preceding quote is potentially at odds with South African law and the Constitution. Adultery may be undesirable, but it is not a crime. Divorce is definitely also not a crime. In fact, it may be the best thing to happen in circumstances of marital abuse and violence. As to how adultery leads to murder, only the chief justice could say.

There is indeed a bitter generation in South Africa and many broken families.

But the suggestion that these emanate from adultery and fornication is neither scientific nor probable. These bitter young people are not at school, at work or in training. They are children of the poor, without hope for the future. What they need is a growing economy that can provide more employment opportunities, to be educated in the skills the country needs, and to become active citizens of our democracy. Outlawing adultery and divorce will not help families that are broken by death, disease and poverty.



We may sneer at pastors like Mnguni, Daniel and Motsoeneng – but corporate and political leaders are doing the same thing.

In an article entitled "God help us: Mogoeng Mogoeng takes the Constitution to church" (30 May 2014), Daily Maverick columnist David Poplak quotes other statements from the same lecture, including "theft is the semen that breeds fraud and corruption", perjury is "on all fours with the ... biblical injunction that 'thou shall not bear false witness'" (whatever that means), and "an oath in the Name of God must be taken seriously or else".

THE GOD OF MMUSI ALOYSIAS MAIMANE

The leader of the official opposition in parliament is also a pastor of Liberty Church, a conservative charismatic church in Randburg. In a sermon there in May 2015, he proclaimed his desire for the kingdom of god to come. Like Mogoeng, Maimane believes that he has been called to politics and that

he is a politician "infused with godly values". He tells a story of being asked to prophesy for a boy was called into politics, only to realise later that he himself was that boy. According to DJ McPhail, the founder of Liberty Church, Maimane was called to both politics and the church, not either/or.

Columnist Gareth van Onselen (Business Day, 3 September 2015) suspects that Maimane's attack on Zuma during debate on the 2015 State of the Nation Address as a "broken President" echoes McPhail's regular use of "brokenness" as a metaphor for sin. Van Onselen discovers two Maimanes – Mmusi the politician, who is sworn to uphold the Constitution, and Aloysias the pastor, who is as conservative as his mentor, McPhail. The Liberty Church teaches that sex is holy and should never be engaged in outside marriage. McPhail also believes homosexual sex is sinful. The church is so concerned about pornography that McPhail is promoting anti-pornography "accountability" software that will enable church executive members to monitor each other's computer usage. Maimane also believes that South Africa must be led by a Christian.

Maimane, Mogoeng and Zuma must be pleased to know that the executive, the judiciary and the opposition of our country are led by Christian men.

THE GODS OF OTHER "MEN OF GOD"

While members of the elite in South African society involve themselves in conservative charismatic Christianity, they are not the believers who eat grass, reptiles, live rodents or human hair, drink petrol, strip naked, or lie down to be trampled upon by the expensive shoes of the "men of god" who lead their churches.

These churches, through their beliefs and practices, not only reproduce prevailing social stratifications, they affirm and reinforce them in ways that

are contrary to the Constitution. As in the economy and in contemporary society generally, young black women and men are at the bottom of the pile. These “children of a lesser god” are prey to both the religious experimentation and the capitalist exploitation embedded in church practices. These churches worship a god who apparently enjoys people being humiliated as part of their quest for blessings and prosperity.

The god of Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Ministries in Garankuwa asked young women and a few young men to eat grass. And they did. The same god later desired members to partake in the drinking of petrol, and again the young women took the lead. Patriarchy is in charge in the church as it is in society.

Not far away in Soshanguve, “Prophet” Penuel Mnguni – apparently mentored by Pastor Daniel in the performance of miracles – ordered church members to commit all the gruesome acts mentioned above in order to prove that nothing is impossible with his god. To do such things, the members must be gullible, have lots of faith or be paid well, or all of the above. Being paid “well” in a situation of abject poverty is, of course, relative.

In the East Rand, near Alberton, is another “man of god”: Paseka Motsoeneng, better known as Pastor Mboro. The god of Pastor Mboro would be called the “divine gynaecologist”, as he specialises in women’s reproductive organs. Pastor Mboro is often required to touch those parts – which he euphemistically calls “biscuits” – as he prays for the afflicted women. He, too, is called by god to put his expensively clad foot on the back of a “demon-possessed” woman crouching before him. So far, neither the police or our Chapter Nine institutions have been able to catch up with Pastor Mboro.

The gospel according to these pastors appears to teach that the way to salvation is via humiliation and indignity.

TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Why do people patronise these modern-day prophets? The answer is complex, but at the heart of it is a toxic model of leadership. And while these “men of god” may be the most dramatic examples, they are also part of a large and growing guild of leaders who display the same warped values in various sectors of society.

In each sector, their followers must declare daily that rats taste like chocolate, petrol like juice and grass like pasta. They dare not say anything to the contrary, at the risk of losing blessings, patronage and status. The entire source of their livelihood could evaporate. We may sneer at Mnguni, Daniel and Motsoeneng – but corporate and political leaders are doing the same thing in other ways. The levels of inequality and poverty in our society are ripe conditions for toxic leaders to thrive.

The demand for bad religion, as practiced by these “men of god” stems from material desperation and high levels of ignorance: an ignorance that is born from cultural and spiritual immaturity as well as from a lack of education. People whose poverty includes cultural, psychological and spiritual bondage are easy pawns for bad religion. Some observers dismiss these events as insignificant, inevitable outcomes of the wilful gullibility of the so-called victims. This is partly true, but an empty stomach has been known to reduce human consciousness to magical and delusional thinking. Others dismiss bad religion as a “problem of the black”, thus resuscitating age-old racial stereotypes.

But leadership is clearly central to the problem. More precisely: a sick, co-dependent relationship between the “men of god” and their followers. Locked into a form of spiritual sadism, the sick leaders and the sick followers need each other every step of the way. The followers symbolically seek a portion of the leader’s power and

charisma for their very sustenance, survival and meaning. And what they seek is pre-eminently material in nature, from the cash they may receive for helping the prophet to the protection they feel as members of a group in a context where each one is alone and exposed to harm.

Consider that fewer than 10 million South Africans are on medical aid. This means that more than 80 percent of South Africans have little else available to them but the services of prophets and palm readers. They watch relatives and friends die prematurely from entirely preventable diseases due to a lack of medication, money and functioning clinics. Add to this an unemployment rate that has seldom dropped below 20 percent and is now around 25 percent. Desperate South Africans, especially the young, are looking for miracles.

The demand for miracles is heightened by rampant corruption, dysfunctional processes, and collapsed community and state institutions. What should be normal straightforward processes to obtain a job application, a driver’s licence, an identity document or an RDP house are fraught with difficulties. Faced with these odds, it seems to the poor that only a miracle can help them.

Ultimately, the grass-eating, petrol-drinking and rodent-eating congregants are chasing the dream promised by their government – the dream of a better life for all in a country where disadvantage is acknowledged, effort is rewarded and merit recognised. But many of our compatriots are losing hope. They are part of the desperate and bitter generations to which Chief Justice Mogoeng referred, children of the cruel gods to be found between Pretoria and George Goch.

Have they been totally abandoned by the Jesus of *Woza Albert!* and the god of Nolan and Kairos? Perhaps God still dwells among the poor and the marginalised, among those who are made to eat grass and drink petrol. Perhaps it is God who is being humiliated. [NA](#)